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IF IT WASN'T FOR THE WOMEN: AN EXPLORATION OF WORKS BY RENITA
WEEMS, WIL GAFNEY, & KELLY BROWN DOUGLAS

by

CHARLENE ADAMS

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Women's and Gender Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2020

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Women's and Gender
Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

If It Wasn't for the Women: An Exploration of Works By Renita Weems, Wil Gafney, & Kelly Brown Douglas

by

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Womanist Bible scholars Renita Weems, Kelly Brown Douglas, and Wil Gafney's offerings to the world of biblical scholarship have had a profound impact on Christian faith in the United States. Womanist biblical scholarship is the hermeneutics, ethics, critique, theology, and more, done with a specific lens on Black women and how we are understood within and as a result of biblical texts. Weems, Douglas, and Gafney's work has asked the tough questions of Christianity, and bravely tackled taboo topics like sexuality, abuse, and racism. Their aim has been to interrogate whose voices have not been present in popular Christian discourse, and the historical context that has led to such silencing. Thus, this paper looks deeply at the scholars' work in three areas: the legitimacy of Black women's biblical interpretation and analysis; their use of sacred texts to contextualize gender-based oppression, and their use of sacred texts to examine the racialized dimension of American Christianity. By analyzing the scholars' books, articles, media appearances, speeches, and more, this paper intends to highlight Weems, Douglas, and Gafney's work as imperative to the world of biblical scholarship.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
The Legitimacy of Black Women’s Biblical Interpretation	8
Use of Sacred Texts to Contextualize Gender-Based Oppression	19
Use of Texts to Examine the Racialized Dimension of American Christianity	32
References	43

Introduction

Elizabeth was born in 1766. Her surname is unknown. What is known, however, is that she believed she was chosen by God to “call the people to repentance” (Elizabeth, 1889, p. 4) as the day of the Lord approaches. In a pamphlet originally published in 1863 (and later in 1889), titled Elizabeth, A Colored Minister of the Gospel, Born in Slavery, the formerly enslaved woman wrote of her spiritual life and her call from God to Christian evangelism. Naturally, this did not come without opposition. She admitted she sometimes felt ashamed and wanted to run and hide from her calling, but resolved that she “could not quench the Spirit,” as Paul instructed the Thessalonians (p. 8). Believing God called her, Elizabeth invoked Paul’s words in his letter to the Corinthians, declaring that she “knew nothing but Jesus Christ, and Him crucified” (p. 6). All this even as she faced imprisonment from those who did not believe “a colored woman could preach” (p. 10). Elizabeth acknowledged in her account that she was “rejected by the elders and rulers, as Christ was rejected by the Jews before me” (p. 8). Still, she wrote boldly and used biblical texts to defend her place in public ministry as an uneducated, formerly enslaved African American woman. Elizabeth was doing womanist theology.

Although biblical studies as an academic discipline developed in the United States in the late 19th century, feminist biblical interpretation is said to have begun in the 1970s (Junior, 2015).

Womanist biblical scholarship began to take definitive shape as a field of study in the 1980s. However, Black women were doing the tough work of racial recognition through the Bible (outside the academic structure) long before then. The lives of Elizabeth, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Sojourner Truth, and many, many more provide a look at the realities of African American women in the contemporary church. They also serve to establish Black women's interpretation and engagement with the biblical text as a longstanding practice — even before such study had a name.

Nyasha Junior puts it plainly in her 2015 book, *An Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation*.

“Despite the myriad ways in which the Bible has been used to oppress African Americans, many African American Christian women developed their own interpretations of the Bible in ways that affirmed their humanity and served to combat their subjugation” (Junior, 2015, p. 39).

Womanist biblical scholarship is the hermeneutics, ethics, critique, theology, and more, done with a specific lens on Black women and how we are understood within and as a result of biblical texts. Black women Bible scholars are not a monolith, however. They differ in their approaches, fields of study, methods, engagement with the text, and even their use of the term womanist. Some do not identify their work as “womanist,” however much of Black women's biblical scholarship can be characterized, in part, by its use of and reliance on the lived experiences of Black women. I use “biblical scholarship” here as a single term for the various

fields of study in which these scholars take part. Among those associated with the development of womanist biblical scholarship are Emilie Townes (an ethicist), Katie Cannon (ethicist known as a matriarch of theological womanism), Jacquelyn Grant (theologian), Clarice Martin (biblical scholar), Delores Williams (theologian) and Renita Weems (biblical scholar). These women specialize in different fields of study, but all do (or did) biblical scholarship. They do not all identify as womanists or describe their work as such. However, when Black women began identifying with the term — coined by Alice Walker — in the ‘80s, many Black women bible scholars began to interact with the word, and many used all or part of Walker’s four-part definition.¹

Given their differences, Black women biblical scholars are not always on one accord. Ethicist Cheryl Sanders has refused to identify as a womanist and argued that Christians should not embrace the label due to its inclusion of homosexuality. Meanwhile, theologian Kelly Brown Douglas consistently affirms queer identities in her work and tackles the often under-discussed

¹ 1. From womanish. (Opp. of “girlish,” i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “you acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. Serious.

2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige and black?” Ans. “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mamma, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless.

4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender

topic of sexuality in the Black church. Additionally, womanist theologian Renee Hill has called out her fellow Black women Bible scholars for failing to address homophobia within womanist biblical scholarship.

“Christian womanists have failed to recognize heterosexism and homophobia as points of oppression that need to be resisted if *all* Black women (straight, lesbian, and bisexual) are to have liberation and a sense of their own power,” she wrote in her essay *Who Are We for Each Other? Sexism, Sexuality and Womanist Theology* (Hill, 1993, p. 346).

Still, a common theme in Black women’s biblical scholarship is its use of Black women’s lived experiences. This biblical scholarship primarily asks the question often posed by Williams in her work: “Whose voice is not present here?” It also decenters the Black church in its theology, holding space for the fact that not all Black women are Christian, as contemporary theologian Monica Coleman has discussed in her work (Coleman, 2006). Black women’s biblical scholarship recognizes the threefold bond of oppression under which Black women live in the nation (race, gender, and class). Many womanist Bible scholars seldom use biblical texts in their works. Douglas does not regularly utilize biblical texts but relates her cultural critique to the nature of God and Jesus Christ concerning race. Meanwhile, Weems specializes in biblical criticism and interpretation and often offers exegesis of particular biblical texts. In contrast, womanist Hebrew Bible scholar Wil Gafney relies heavily on biblical texts in much of her work.

Weems is considered a pioneer of womanist biblical scholarship. Her 1988 book, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible*, was the first to be labeled womanist biblical interpretation (Junior, 2015). She graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary and is the first Black woman to earn a Ph.D. in Old Testament Studies. Her other books include, *I Asked for Intimacy: Stories of Blessings, Betrayals, and Birthings* (1993); *What Matters Most: Ten Lessons in Living Passionately from the Song of Solomon* (2004); *Showing Mary: How Women Can Share Prayers, Wisdom, and the Blessings of God* (2002); *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (1995), and her memoir *Listening for God: A Minister's Journey Through Silence and Doubt* (1995). Weems identifies herself as both a womanist and feminist scholar as she addresses the use of biblical texts in upholding oppression. She does not always use the term womanist or womanism in her works, though, even if she does use a womanist approach. From TV and conference appearances to tweets and articles for *Ebony*, Weems usually writes for lay audiences, making biblical scholarship easily accessible and understandable for those outside academia.

Gafney is a professor of Hebrew Bible at Brite Divinity School in Texas and has cemented herself as one of Twitter's top accounts for womanist interpretation, lessons, and witty retorts. In her 2017 book, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*, Gafney offers exegesis of several Bible stories and passages. In her work, she takes a unique approach to womanist interpretation, holding that it does not focus on the experience of Black women at the expense of others. Instead, she notes, a womanist approach is inclusive of others. Gafney heavily relies on the biblical text in her teachings, especially when speaking of sexuality.

She wrote *Daughters of Miriam: Women Prophets in Ancient Israel* (2008) and co-edited *The Peoples' Bible* and *The Peoples' Companion to the Bible*.

Douglas' work is marked mostly by her cultural critique of structural racism, gender violence, and homophobia within the Black church. She has penned books and essays and appeared on news programs speaking out about police brutality and other structures of oppression. In her 1999 book, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*, Douglas does not offer exegesis but highlights the use of biblical texts to uphold cultural norms like homophobia and racism. Her other works include *The Black Christ* (1994); *What's Faith Got to Do with It?: Black Bodies/Christian Souls*; (2005); *Black Bodies and the Black Church: A Blues Slant* (2012) and *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (2015). Douglas, a Dayton, Ohio, native, is the first Black woman to be ordained an Episcopal Church priest in the Southern Ohio Diocese. She was ordained at St. Margaret's Episcopal Church in 1985. She has served or taught at several churches and institutions over the years. She has been the Canon Theologian at the Washington National Cathedral since 2017.

My interest in womanist biblical scholarship began as a rumbling inside me that I could not explain. I grew up as a non-denominational Christian in West Philadelphia with a mother who fiercely loved the Lord. I "grew up in the church" as many Black Christians have, and clearly remember marching into the Praise and Glory Tabernacle each Sunday and often even spending

the night at the church with my friends. My inherited passion for Christ waned in my late teens, only to return fiercely in my early 20s as I sought to reconnect with the God of my mother.

This reconnection coincided with my introduction to feminism — and later, womanism. I began looking to reconcile my feminist beliefs with my faith which, at the time, seemed to be opposing ideologies. This journey led me to works by prominent white women faith leaders whose work challenged patriarchal doctrine. But although they provided a brief introduction to what I then called “Christian feminism,” I was not satisfied. I wanted to be immersed in a biblical scholarship that tackled race, gender, and class. This desire led me first to Douglas’ *Sexuality and the Black Church*, then Gafney’s *Womanist Midrash*, and Weems’ *Just a Sister Away*. These books have influenced my politics most and have uprooted the way I view faith and spirituality. These women, through their work, have changed me and my faith in ways I never thought possible.

Thus, when I began thinking deeply about my master’s thesis to chronicle my time at The Graduate Center, CUNY, Weems, Gafney, and Douglas quickly came to mind. Few things interest me more than Christianity and Black womanhood. Douglas the activist, Gafney the sharp-tongued Hebrew Bible scholar, and Weems the storyteller have most fanned the flames of my own biblical scholarship. They have had the most significant impact on my belief system and my work as a Black academic.

The Legitimacy of Black Women’s Biblical Interpretation as Normative and Authoritative

“Most simply to exegete is to seek meaning, even more simply the primary verb just means to seek. Seek God in the world and in the text. Seek God in yourself and others. And when you find that which is not God in the world, in the text, in yourself, in others, call it out, to its face.” - Wil

Gafney (Holy Leviticus! Justice is True Holiness) (Gafney, 2019)

Despite existing in a largely individualistic world, Black communities tend to be more collectivistic than those around us. There is a sense of community — of togetherness — that underlies what it means to be Black, and more so what it means to be a Black woman. Community and togetherness may even function as verbs, in that they are active, ongoing commitments. This sense of community is key in Rev. Wil Gafney’s legitimation of Black women’s interpretive practices as normative and authoritative. She relies on Alice Walker’s definition of womanism in her scholarly efforts. In interviews, she cracks a warm smile as she declares Walker’s words, “Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.” The classically trained Bible scholar draws on her Southern roots as she uses “supper” as a guiding metaphor in her 2017 book *Womanist Midrash* to highlight the communal, diverse atmosphere present in womanist midrash.

Womanist midrash utilizes the classical Jewish form of scholarly interpretation that is *midrash* to attend to characters most marginalized in biblical narratives, especially women and girls. It

intentionally centers the lives and experiences of enslaved persons and non-Israelite peoples and consists of retelling stories, according to Gafney. If feminism aims to tackle ideas about gender, power, and authority, womanism takes it several steps further by looking at all these systems from an intersectional stance (Putman, 2019). Who is in the community? What role do they assume, and what roles do they have thrust upon them? Womanist interpretation makes and holds space both for these questions and for persons forgotten in the text, according to Gafney. When womanists in biblical scholarship ask these questions, they do so while privileging “the crossroads between our Afro-diasporic identity ... and our gender” (Gafney, 2017, p. 7).

Gafney says truth is paramount in her womanist interpretation, telling the truth about the text and its implications (Putman, 2019). It is plain to see through her work that part of that truth-telling is being a literalist about God-language. In *Womanist Midrash*, Gafney highlights the nature of rabbinic readings to discern value in texts, words, and letters — this likely explains her unwavering dedication to rejecting overarching masculine language. She rarely uses masculine constructions and opts instead to “restore” the text by returning to the use of explicitly feminine God-language (Gafney, 2017).

She argues womanist biblical studies to be radical because it seeks the point of origin of sacred texts. But she highlights that there is not a single womanist communal practice.

Gafney considers womanist practice to seek and value the voice and perspective of the entire community and not promote a hierarchy by valuing the experience of Black women at the

expense of others. Instead, it holds womanist interpretation as normative. It asks questions about power, authority, voice, agency, hierarchy, inclusion, and exclusion (Gafney, 2017). In Gafney's view of womanist practice, the voice of each member of the community is equally valuable, autonomous, and authoritative. Gafney retells the stories of the women of the Torah and the throne through a womanist lens in *Womanist Midrash* and draws on womanist theological interpretation as a field of study as well as her own experiences (Gafney, 2017). Thus, Gafney is not merely a scholar objectively using interpretive practices to make claims about the lives of those overlooked in biblical narratives. No, she is situated in these stories herself. Questions she asks of agency, hierarchy, authority, and power are those often imagined in the everyday lives of Black women. As such, Gafney is both within the text and without. This is at the core of womanist interpretation, Black women seeing ourselves in the text, pulling ourselves out of the text, and understanding our position within the text in a meaningful way.

Gafney warns that doing the hard work of womanist interpretation does not mean that enough rigorous study of the Hebrew Bible will render Black women's stories pleasant, powerful, and affirming (Putman, 2019). No. Gafney notes that the Bible's problems do not vanish with enough interpretation: "sometimes the text is itself horrifying. And that doesn't go away with anybody's culturally-cued hermeneutic" (Putman, 2019).

With that, womanist interpretation is a state of constant reckoning. As Gafney puts it, it is "God-wrestling:"

“Womanists at the intersection of biblical scholarship and religious faith and practice engage the Scriptures of our communities as members of those communities. No matter how misogynistic, how heavily redacted, how death-dealing, how troubled, troubling, or troublesome the text, womanists who teach and preach in the black church do not throw the whole androcentric text with its patriarchal and kyriarchal lowlights out of our stained-glass windows because of its Iron Age theology. We wrestle with it because it has been received as Scripture. Our wrestling should not be taken to mean that we affirm texts that do not affirm us” (Gafney, 2017, p. 8).

As much as womanist interpretation centers the community, it demands that we interrogate the contents of that community. As a Bible scholar, as a storyteller, as a womanist, Rev. Dr. Renita J. Weems does this in much of her work, notably in her 1988 book, *Just a Sister Away*. In Weems’ own words, she wrote *Just a Sister Away* for “those of us who are hungry” (Weems, 1988, p. viii). This is a womanist endeavor. This hunger is the subtle rumbling in the souls of many Black women that is womanism — the rumbling persists long before we have a name or language for it.

Weems writes: “What we do know is that one of the best ways to get an idea of how a woman feels about being a woman is to take a look at how she treats other women” (p. x).

This serves as a guiding principle as Weems pulls out the hidden stories of Hagar and Sarah, Martha and Mary, Miriam and her Cushite sister-in-law, and more in *Just a Sister Away*. The Bible scholar uses her sacred imagination to present a womanist vision and paint a human picture

of the women's plights, desires, and positionalities — breaking from white theology that overlooks the nuance of these stories.

In much of her commentary, Weems speaks of womanist theology and African-American female theology and appears to use the terms interchangeably. She describes herself as a first-generation womanist academic (Weems, 2017). She considers the foremost principle of womanist praxis to be taking “seriously the lived experiences of struggle and survival of Black women against multiple forces of oppression in the academy, Church, and world” (Weems, 2017). Weems recalls the early years of womanist biblical scholarship as a community of bold womanist biblical scholars and theologians setting their “hands with our books, dissertations, sermons, and lecture notes to tilling, digging, planting, watering, and chopping away at the weeds so that future generations would not have to search for unmarked sites” (Weems, 2017). Now, Weems adds, the work is being continued by a new generation of Black women intellectuals (Byron, Lovelace, 2016).

Weems describes womanist interpretation as taking seriously the critiques of those outside the inner circle of dialogue (Weems, 1993). At the core of this interpretation, to Weems, is the belief that human beings are all connected, and we mutually depend on one another for emancipation and survival. Therefore, Black women theologians and biblical scholars endeavor to ground their analysis of women's experiences in that of all oppressed people struggling for liberation (Weems, 1993). Even in the world of biblical scholarship and theology, the personal is political, Weems writes, referring to the famous feminist political argument.

When thinking about traditional interpretation, interpreters, and interpretive methods, Weems notes that all interpretive strategies should be viewed as advocacy positions. Meaning, the predispositions one has going into the text influence what one gets out of the text (Weems, 1993). This means that all interpretations of texts and data reflect a politically influenced positionality. This is no surprise as the Bible, Weems argues, is itself political.

“The Bible is a thoroughly political document, both because of its adjudicating status in our social world and because it reflects a long history of political decisions made about interpretation, transmission, re-interpretation, and canonization,” Weems writes. “Issues about who speaks and who is silenced; whose voice is authoritative and whose is not; who belongs to the community of faith and who does not; who is empowered and who is disenfranchised; whose manuscript or scroll is preserved and whose destroyed — these issues constitute the historical background of much of religious literature” (Weems, 1993, p. 219).

By examining the relationships of the women in the Bible, Weems encourages readers to not look at the Bible as a good-bad dichotomy and, instead, see the humanity and realities of living in the Bible’s heteronormative, gendered world with a gender-based hierarchy. In other words, to explore and appreciate gray areas. Whether it be through investigating the avoidable death of Jephthah’s daughter, or Mary and Martha’s sisterhood, Weems’ intellectual offerings work to show that ideology is one thing and reality is another.

In *I Asked for Intimacy*, Weems' 1993 literary offering, she admits that everything she knows about God she has "learned in the muck of intimate human interchange" (p. 11). It is intimate questions that serve as the foundation for living a life of faith to the author (Weems, 1993).

"I've always wanted to ask God why children die, why women stay in abusive relationships, why it is easier sometimes to hate than to love, why my mother was an alcoholic..." Answers to intimate questions are sought (and sometimes found) in personal places and, Weems declares, "the most intimate of places, as far as I'm concerned, is in the area of human relationships..." (Weems, 1993, p. 11). Therefore, an exploration of intimate relationships characterizes Weems' womanist biblical scholarship.

We often hear in the Black Church about the importance of community. Being in community and "doing life with people." It has become a cliché. However, Black women's biblical interpretation reinserts the nuance, the emotion, and the soul-stirring truth into what it means to do community. Not only does Black women's biblical interpretation (even if unintentionally) push back against the conservative, fundamentalist, evangelical culture that has come to be the identity of Western Christianity, it inserts community back into the text. This means that this interpretation does not look for holy clichés by which we can spiritualize almost anything. It looks deeply at the complexity of the human condition through the lives of Bible characters. It works to see the women of the Bible. In essence, Black women's biblical interpretation serves as a way of seeing — a lens through which we understand God, the Bible, and one another.

“I wanted to whisper hope in the ears of African-American women because in our patriarchal culture we seem always to be on a most desperate search to be loved, to be accepted, to be discussed, to be known for who we really are,” Weems explains of her purpose for writing *I Asked for Intimacy* (Weems, 1993, p. 13).

“When Jesus stepped ashore, he was met by a demon-possessed man from the town. For a long time this man had not worn clothes or lived in a house, but had lived in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell at his feet, shouting at the top of his voice, ‘What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, don’t torture me!’ For Jesus had commanded the impure spirit to come out of the man. Many times it seized him, and though he was chained hand and foot and kept under guard, he had broken his chains and had been driven by the demon into solitary places.

Jesus asking him, ‘What is your name’ ” (Luke 8:27-30 NIV).

Rev. Canon Kelly Brown Douglas spoke at Yale Divinity School in 2008 on a panel in which scholars were asked: "What are effective strategies for eradicating the misogyny, heterosexism, and homophobia in Black communities in the African diaspora?" She recalled Luke 8:27, telling the audience that she is often reminded of this passage when she speaks about Jesus in the context of the Black community and its problems.

“The first thing that Jesus did was name the demons,” Douglas said. “It seems to me that before we can eradicate heterosexism, misogyny, and homophobia, we need to name the demon. We need to name it.”

To Douglas, struggles against the sins of gender and sexual identity oppression require that we recognize the intersecting realities of all -isms, phobias, etc. Acknowledging that they are all a part of a “social, political narrative of power. That is, they are all a part of white, patriarchal, imperialistic, capitalistic power.” Heterosexism, homophobia, and misogyny feed this narrative and serve the white male agenda of oppressive power, Douglas said.

Very seldom does Douglas speak explicitly about the nature of Black women’s biblical interpretation. However, this interpretation does not exist without naming these demons and being honest about their purpose — which is to serve the white cisgender male agenda of oppressive power, Douglas holds. Douglas’ study of womanist theology as a priest and academic has not been a complicated balance, she told *The Oberlin Review* in 2013. This is because she believes theology to be about faith and understanding the ways in which Christians understand the faith claims we make, she says. This is a womanist endeavor. Womanist interpretation requires that we move away from indoctrination and toward a contextualized reading and understanding of the text, Douglas implies. This is to be done no matter how uncomfortable a project it may be.

“Now what you’re getting at is that sometimes people say — particularly in the black faith tradition — all of that study and intellectual stuff, you take my Jesus and you take my God ... One thing I always say is that any faith worth having is a faith worth examining. And I often say to people, if [the bible] is so sacred as you say it is then you need to study it as you would a text that is not so sacred,” Douglas says (Gill, 2013).

I have heard many times from Black Christians a familiar mantra: “I’m a Christian before I’m Black.” The statement is provocative and draws on scriptures that promote the oneness of all God’s children. Such as:

“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise,” (Galatians 3:28 NIV).

While this may evoke pleasant feelings for some, to believe that one’s Christianity supersedes their Blackness in importance serves not to foster a sense of community and oneness. Instead, it works to ignore and repress the social and cultural ills that characterize a racist society. Through Douglas’ work, it is clear that womanist interpretation does the work of interrogating the cultural implications of the text on modern society, and it acknowledges the role Western Christianity has played in creating and upholding these social and cultural ills. Douglas puts it plainly in her 1999 book *Sexuality and the Black Church*, in which she tells the story of Sarah Bartmann, a Black South African woman taken to Europe in the 1800s to have her shapely body put on display as a

circuslike attraction. Dubbed the “Hottentot Venus,” her body was exploited even after her death. She was not given a proper burial in her homeland until 2002 (Daley, 2002).

“The depiction of Sarah Bartmann is representative of the manner in which Black men and women were to be depicted by White culture. They were portrayed as lustful and passionate beings,” Douglas (1999) writes (p. 35). “That such a nature served as sufficient proof of Black people’s inferiority, and thus their need to be dominated by White people, no doubt reflects the influence of the Western Christian tradition ... To be sure, this tradition would influence White cultural disposition toward Black people.”

There is much naming that goes on in Womanist biblical interpretation. From Gafney’s community-focused approach and Weems’ concern for human relationships to Douglas’ cultural critique, this interpretation requires that we call attention to that which has been stripped of its significance throughout the centuries. Womanist biblical interpretation is continual exegesis. It is legitimate and authoritative in its quest to seek meaning and call out boldly that which is not God in the world, in the text, and in ourselves.

Use of Sacred Texts to Contextualize Gender-Based Oppression Both in the Text and In Our Current Reality

Bible scholars and spiritual leaders have debated for decades whether the Bible is to be interpreted metaphorically rather than literally — whether metaphor should be a primary mode of biblical articulation. No matter which side of the debate one falls, one thing is true: metaphor is a consistent characteristic of the Bible and, thus, influences readers in very literal ways. It was with this belief that Weems penned *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets*. *Battered Love* examines and exposes the misogyny and violence of prophetic metaphors of marriage and family presented as representations of God’s relationship with Israel. In *Battered Love*, Weems links the prophets’ metaphorical poetry to the gender-based oppression inherent in modern culture. With that, the Bible scholar suggests that the misogyny of the scriptures and sexism today are connected, with the former likely laying the foundation for the latter. *Battered Love* is perhaps Weems’ most deliberate offering endeavoring to use sacred texts to contextualize gender-based oppression. She looks deeply at the prophecies of Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekial to express and illustrate the ways in which sexist metaphors and images serve to legitimate and permit sexist human power — particularly sexist, cisgendered male human power. She notes that she chose to focus on the three prophets specifically to examine biblical representations of female sexuality because they are well known for their descriptions of promiscuous and battered women as poetic devices for “divine punishment” (Weems, 1995).

The topics of sex and violence in prophetic discourse and cultural critique are inseparable. There is a reason the image of the cheating wife, lusty whore, and wayward woman resonates with communities today. Much like in U.S. social culture, the metaphors of the prophets associated battery, infidelity, and the rape and mutilation of women with love, compassion, commitment, and reconciliation (Weems, 1995). Weems (1995) argues that “Perhaps more than any other material in the Bible, the portraits of women’s sexuality drawn by Israel’s prophets have contributed to the overall impression one gets from the Bible that women’s sexuality is deviant, evil and dangerous” (p. 5). Prophets used extravagant and explicit imagery to grab and hold the attention of their audience — most likely a male audience, Weem notes.

“Rebuke your mother, rebuke her, for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband. Let her remove the adulterous look from her face and the unfaithfulness from between her breasts. Otherwise I will strip her naked and make her as bare as on the day she was born; I will make her like a desert, turn her into a parched land, and slay her with thirst.” (Hosea 2:2-3 NIV)

This scripture may seem tame to modern readers, but the culture of the time was one in which nakedness was private, and public nudity was a shameful display of degradation (Weems, 1995). This was likely not lost on Hosea’s audience, Weems writes. There is a consistent storyline in many of these scriptures. A loving husband clothes, feeds, and cares for his wife, only for his wife to cheat on him and/or exhibit sexually deviant behavior. Weems identifies the marriage metaphor — casting God as husband and Israel as the wayward wife — as the most popular

among the prophets. However, she identifies four others used to characterize God's divine relationship with Israel: parent-child, judge and litigant, master and slave, and king and vassal.

All functioned as metaphors of punishment and power, relying on the imbalances of power present in the social contexts of the time (Weems, 1995). Patriarchy and the harm that results cannot exist without violence against women because patriarchy is a severe imbalance of power. Violence thrives on — and stems from — imbalances of power. Not only does the marriage metaphor take for granted men's very real contextual rights and power over women, "it reflects a fascination with female nakedness; and it assumes that the actions of men are somehow analogous to God's actions. In short, it is a metaphor most likely created by the male imagination for the male imagination" (Weems, 1995). The prophets drew on sexual activities including marriage, infidelity, sexual violence, and sexual reunion to describe God and Israel's history. The end story of reconciliation is intended to make right the wrongs and harms done to the women in the poetic prophecy, Weems holds. One could argue that these texts are not to be taken seriously as influential scriptures because of their blatant violence, but, as Weems notes, metaphors originate in social contexts and reinforce social contexts.

"Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem: 'This is what the Lord says: "I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the wilderness, through a land not sown." ' " (Jeremiah 2:2 NIV)

Hosea, with his poetic concern with Samaria, is widely considered the first prophet to use the marriage metaphor to describe the God-Israel relationship, Weems credits. And some 100 years later, Jeremiah would call on the imagery to appeal to Jerusalem by contrasting its past with its present (Weems, 1995).

“If a man divorces his wife and she leaves him and marries another man, should he return to her again? Would not the land be completely defiled? But you have lived as a prostitute with many lovers— would you now return to me?” declares the Lord. “Look up to the barren heights and see. Is there any place where you have not been ravished? By the roadside you sat waiting for lovers, sat like a nomad in the desert. You have defiled the land with your prostitution and wickedness.” (Jeremiah 3:1-2 NIV)

Prophets used these metaphors as vehicles to appeal to powerful men in the public sphere. The prophets intended the dramatic, gripping poetry of violence and lust and love and reconciliation for an audience of elite Hebrew men who had the power to influence and set the nation’s moral and political direction (Weems, 1995). Thus, these metaphors weren’t merely entertaining, she argues. They had a purpose. One may question why the prophets would rely on the degradation of women as a means to an end in their quest to persuade policymakers to turn from their wicked ways and back to God. In answering this question, Weems highlights the Ancient Near Eastern mythology custom of portraying cities as women. Thus, she explains, the prophets were not doing anything new or groundbreaking. Still, such metaphors were appealing to the esteemed male audiences because they utilized a relatable scenario from the private sphere that would

surely shock any of the powerful men. If men's status and honor relied mainly on their ability to control their women's sexual lives, a sexually "loose" woman would reflect very, very poorly on him. The marriage metaphor, insultingly, compared the men to the lusty, wayward women in the poetry while simultaneously perpetuating the sexist lore about women and women's bodies that vilify women and absolve men of any guilt in harming their wives. After all, as Weems explains, surely any sensible man would react harshly and violently to their wife exhibiting adulterous and deviant behavior. Although sacred texts containing offensive imagery are often dismissed through spiritualization, Weems uncovers and shines a light on the purpose of the imagery then and its impact on modern society.

In her 2014 piece titled *Domestic Violence: The Sin that Sin Created*, Douglas contextualizes gender-based oppression as an overarching, structural issue. She alludes to the social contexts of the Bible that normalized a patriarchal, heteronormative culture which produces violence against women. Much like the topic of sex and violence in the prophets, structural oppression in the Bible cannot be separated from cultural critique. In her analysis of violence against women, Douglas names it as a sin that goes beyond interpersonal relationships (Douglas, 2014).

"Far too often our attention is driven to the individual, personal attacks against women; that is, the individual, personal sin. The focus is on the individual sinner, as if to punish the perpetrator

of domestic violence is to address the sin,” she writes (Douglas, 2014). “In this regard, we domesticate the violence, and hence, domesticate the sin. In so doing, we fail to uproot the sin that produces — the interactive, systemic, structural, and cultural sin which fosters violence against women.”

She notes that this violence is, thus, treated as private wrongdoing rather than a symptom of a larger public offense. However, Douglas describes sin as more than an act by a person or society, but as an “orientation.”

Jesus’ treatment of women is often lauded as countercultural, and proof that he values and prioritizes women just as he does men. For example, in John 4, Jesus breaks Jewish social code and speaks with a Samaritan woman at a well. Douglas describes this as Jesus’ impressive “one-on-one compassionate, caring, and non-violent treatment of women” (Douglas, 2014).

Jesus showed mercy to a woman accused of adultery in John 8, refusing to stone her and, in Luke 13, Jesus healed a woman “crippled by a spirit” for 18 years on a Sabbath. She praises his acts as instructive lessons on how to treat one another. However, the scholar holds that Jesus did not only ignore social conventions in private, interpersonal situations.

“...even more notable is the way in which he took on the very systems and structures of sin that perpetuated violence against women and created ethnic, religious and gender ‘outcasts’ within his world,” Douglas (2014) writes.

In *Sexuality and the Black Church*, Douglas gives a womanist perspective of the beloved church institution and its participation in gender oppression. She identifies homophobia as a deadly, violent injustice that “does not save Black lives, but rather helps White culture to destroy them” (Douglas, 1999, p. 107). Although citation of biblical texts is now commonly used to support homophobic beliefs, Douglas highlights white supremacy’s use of sexuality as a tool for the denigration and subjugation of Black people. Early foundations of white supremacy in the U.S. depended on dehumanizing Blackness, and one way that was done was through equating Black people and Blackness with sexual deviance (Douglas, 1999).

Thus, as Douglas notes, the Black community has struggled for centuries to “sever the link between such deviance and Blackness” (Douglas, 1999, p. 97). Over time, this has evolved into an emotional outrage surrounding homosexuality based on free-floating ideas about sexuality that often lack context, she holds. In a society that considers homosexuality abnormal at best and deviant and perverted at worst, the Black community has prioritized its rejection of homosexuality as one of the most prominent ways for Black people to distance themselves from the notion that Blackness is inherently sexually deviant (Douglas, 1999). Naturally, as Western Christian ideals are deeply rooted in all parts of American thought, biblical texts are often used to support the bias.

In matters of sexuality, Douglas highlights the Black faith tradition, noting that its understanding of soul salvation includes freedom of the body. She notes that white supremacy embedded in U.S. culture is largely to blame for the Black church’s history of homophobia (Douglas, 2006) —

though she does note many pro-LGBTQI churches and affirming traditions within the Black church.

She writes: “Black people must reclaim their own faith heritage that maintains the sanctity of the body and thereby recognizes that true salvation is not simply about what happens to the soul, but also what happens to the body” (Douglas, 2006).

Like Douglas, much of Gafney’s scholarship centers around how people live with and relate to one another. Gafney goes as far as to look deeply at how Bible characters’ simple interactions can give us insight into who God is. This is powerfully done in her analysis of the book of Leviticus. She does not shy away from pointing out the hierarchal, patriarchal social context of Leviticus. Still, she describes the scriptures as “fully human and fully divine.” Furthermore, Gafney declares, “Leviticus is a get right and get your people right text.”

Gafney calls Leviticus “the heart of the Torah” (Gafney, 2017). She defines the book as a text about how to live and be in relationship, both with God and with others in the community. In Leviticus, Moses relays to the Israelites the ten commandments instructed by God — followed by a slew of more detailed laws governing everything from cleanliness to hospitality. Many uphold Leviticus as a formula for a holy, sanctified lifestyle based on God’s principles. But

Gafney's womanist interpretation looks deeper and calls the text out to its face while simultaneously affirming its nature as holy with affirming lessons that apply to life today. According to Gafney, Leviticus envisions a heteronormative, gendered world with a gender-based hierarchy. However, Gafney brings attention to Leviticus' discussion of the consequences and implications of both male and female human physicality (Gafney, 2017). The text is inherently androcentric and sexist, in accordance with the ancient culture, Gafney notes. When critiquing the text regarding gender oppression, multiple issues stand out for the reverend and professor: the differing treatment of women who birth daughters and those who birth sons, the taboo surrounding menstruation and childbirth, and who is not an appropriate intimate partner.

“Say to the Israelites; ‘A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days, just as she is unclean during her monthly period ... If she gives birth to a daughter, for two weeks the woman will be unclean, as during her period.’ “
(Leviticus 12:2,5 NIV)

Still, Gafney establishes Leviticus as a “public-health text,” highlighting its suggestion that good health — physical, spiritual, and societal — starts with the individual self and spreads to the community. Community members are urged to take their health and that of their community seriously. Gafney reads into the text, and uses her womanist interpretation to go a step further:

“I argue that taking one’s health and the health of one’s community seriously as a religious obligation also means taking seriously one’s own sexual health and the health of one’s sexual partners,” she writes (Gafney, 2017, p. 108). “In this light, these texts can be read as a calling for sexually active persons to determine and monitor their HIV or other sexually transmitted-infection status, share that information with their partners, use condoms as appropriate, and maintain sexual fidelity.”

While the text does not explicitly state such a declaration, Gafney’s womanist interpretation provides a reading of the text that applies to our current reality. If public health is key in Leviticus, the use of “clean” and “unclean” within the text would surely draw the attention of womanist interpreters. Translation is largely responsible for the opposing terms, Gafney argues, but “clean” and “unclean” tend to serve as “othering” functions, meaning that they stigmatize affected people and impose negative, shame-based perceptions of various circumstances including childbirth and disease (Gafney, 2017). Deeming menstruation an “unclean” circumstance surely stigmatizes the natural cycle, an attitude still present today.

Gafney put her approach to interpretation plainly during a 2018 discussion as part of the Jude 3 Project’s Courageous Conversations conference: “God is larger than the Bible. What I understand God to know is more than the persons who recorded the Bible.”

When it comes to the gender-based oppression found in the text — which is often used to justify gender oppression in today’s realities — Gafney notes that many Old Testament scriptures paint

a picture of sexuality based on ideological stories that reflect the dominant culture — that is, heterosexual, heteronormative culture. They do not, however, account for the experiences of all people (Gafney, 2018). She argues that the Biblical text sustains sexist practices like abduction and rape (Deut. 20:11), and selling daughters into slavery (Exodus 21:7), and presents them as normative activities that serve as “nation-building” practices.

Thus, Gafney presents the notion of sexuality not as set in stone by God, but sexuality and its manifestations as often configured by humans in the Biblical text. Gafney uses polygamy as an example, noting that the practice is the result of people shaping marriage in a social construct. God, as Gafney states, even participates in polygamy by rewarding patriarchs with wives and women to simply have sex with (commonly referred to in many translations as concubines).

Gafney calls readers to consider the women of the Bible, those whose names we know and those whose names we do not know (Gafney, 2017). This consideration should not be a simple nod of acknowledgment, but an intentional, critical analysis of their lives as presented in the text.

Gafney does this notably through her interpretation of Abraham and Sarah’s incestuous relationship — Sarah is Abraham’s half-sister — and his ultimate relinquishing of Sarah to the Pharaoh and acceptance of a settlement for doing so.

*“For a while he stayed in Gerar, and there Abraham said of his wife Sarah, ‘She is my sister.’
Then Abimelek king of Gerar sent for Sarah and took her. But God came to Abimelek in a dream*

one night and said to him, 'You are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken; she is a married woman.' *“(Gen. 20:1-3 NIV)*

In essence, Gafney notes, “Her brother-husband sold her to a man he knew would use her for sex” (pp. 32-33). This is not the story we usually hear about Abraham and Sarah in church and church discussions. We learn of their union, her unfaithfulness to God by using Hagar, God’s blessing of a child to the couple, and Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac. But Sarah’s personal story is equally important to those narratives. Equally important is the understanding of “language as a tool of persuasion and not a divine articulation of right relationships between women and men” (Gafney, 2013). It is with this knowledge that Gafney examines the role of rape in the Hebrew Bible.

“Moses said to them ... Now therefore, kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known a man by sleeping with him. But all the young girls who have not known a man by sleeping with him, keep alive for yourselves.” *(Numbers 31:15-18)*

God takes part in this “rape language,” too.

“Therefore I delivered [Jerusalem] into the hands of her lovers, the Assyrians, for whom she lusted. They stripped her naked, took away her sons and daughters and killed her with the sword. She became a byword among women, and punishment was inflicted on her.” *(Ezekiel 23:9-11)*

Therefore, womanist biblical scholarship must reckon with the fact that that biblical gender norms — in all their patriarchy, sexism, and misogyny — are considered to be “divinely articulated.”

“While we as women and men decry rape and rape culture in civil society, we must not neglect its roots in our sacred texts and the ways in which it contributes to theologies of the human person, gender and God,” Gafney writes (Gafney, 2013).

“It is clear to me that biblical tradents were not able to envision a world in which rape was not normative. Fortunately, I can.”

Use of Sacred Texts to Examine the Racialized Dimension of American Christianity

“[Black faith is] faith that finds its meaning in the absurdities and contradictions of Black life. Black faith cannot change the world how, how we wish it could. Black faith cannot save our children’s lives how much we wish it could. It fundamentally, however, gives us the courage to be free in a world that rejects our right to be free.” - Kelly Brown Douglas (2016 Festival of Faith and Writing).

On Saturday, July 13, 2013, a six-person jury found George Zimmerman not guilty of murdering 17-year-old Trayvon Martin. The next morning, Douglas went to church.

A dark cloud hung in the air as the congregation filed into the building with few words. Scheduled to preach, Douglas did not deliver a sermon directly addressing the disheartening verdict. Instead, she spoke to the congregation about Black faith, including the remarks quoted above. She added that Black faith produces the courage to believe in the freedom of God, as “Black faith was not born in a time when things were going well for Black bodies” (Douglas, 2016).

Douglas’ career as a public womanist theologian and Bible scholar can be characterized, in part, by her commitment to connecting matters of the divine to our current reality. She is not of the mind that the spirit of God is to be always and only separated from the physical, tangible world we experience each day. Instead, there is a strong link between faith and culture, a link that

produces both negative and positive outcomes. Douglas' work in examining the racialized dimension of American Christianity not only highlights this link but turns on its head any notion that the divine and our every day, walking-around-lives are separate and should be separated. In her address at the 2016 Festival of Faith and Writing, Douglas revealed that she never planned to write her most recent book, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*. She said it was the murder of Martin that sent her on a new journey through racial recognition. In her studies, she learned that what had killed Trayvon "was embedded in the roots of this nation." This, she said, led her ultimately to question whether God is truly just. She has found her answer, which she boldly states often during her numerous public speaking engagements. As she does so, Douglas casts the just nature of God as oppositional to white supremacy and any structures that oppress Black people.

"The only way to know — even come close to knowing — the fullness of God is to indeed encounter the diversity of God's creation," she said during the 2018 Kelso Lecture on Race and Faith at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

"And here is the thing, in as much as a lack of cross-cultural and racial literacy and engagement promotes white supremacist and anti-Black violence — and it does — then such a lack is anti-God."

Douglas often draws on the Exodus story of the Israelites when speaking about Black freedom, particularly freedom from oppression and the freedom to simply live (Douglas, 2018). As the

Old Testament story goes, the Egyptians enslaved the Israelites, subjecting them to hard labor, severe living conditions, and abuse. God saw the suffering of God's people and, with the use of Moses, freed them from the chains of an ancient Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

“The Lord said, ‘I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians ...’ (Exodus 3:7-8).

To Douglas, God's participation in the Israelites' freedom was not solely an act of compassion and justice (Douglas, 2018). It also revealed the very nature of God as a God of freedom from oppression. This freedom and justice, Douglas writes in *Stand Your Ground*, is not only for the ancient Israelites. The nature of God as a God of freedom and justice is true for Black people of the present time.

She writes: “The exodus story points to the fact that God chose to free a people from circumstances that were contrary to who God created them to be. God's choice was motivated by the very freedom that is God ... The Israelites' particular historical circumstances serve as the historical context through which God reveals a universal concern for all people ... In this instance, it reaffirms the very freedom of God” (Douglas, 2015, p. 158).

This understanding of God as a God of freedom does not explain away the Israelites' suffering and struggle for freedom. Likewise, the justice and freedom of God do not cancel out what

Douglas calls the “persistent dark side to God’s world.” She highlights the “deep grief and great hope” that exists in the tears of the mothers of the Black children killed — like Trayvon. These mothers experienced the same sorrow felt by Rachel from beyond the grave thousands of years ago as Herod, the king of Judea, ordered the killing of all toddler boys in Bethlehem in hopes of murdering Jesus (Matthew 2:18).

“A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more” (Jeremiah 31:15).

Western philosophy is inherently white and protestant in its orientation, values, sense of morality, and motivations. American Christianity and white culture are intrinsically linked, and all Americans find ourselves adhering to these ideals in some way — whether we are aware of it or not. This is perhaps best illustrated by the nature of race-oppression in the country (and elsewhere, of course, but I focus on the United States here). With that, Western Christian ideals are deeply rooted in all parts of American thought. And the Bible is often used to support the bias and oppression created by and through a white supremacist culture.

In an August 2017 blog post titled *White Supremacy in the White House, in the Church, and in the Streets*, Gafney reminds us that Christianity and Western Christian culture are very different things. Because white supremacy permeates Western Christian culture, the ways in which we envision and practice justice have become white-washed too (Gafney, 2017).

“In many churches the Blessed Sacrament is white and only white,” she writes. “Is it any wonder everyone else is other? Of course some churches use dark bread, and have multicultural art and icons whether their people are people of color or people of pallor.

“I’m talking about the dominant construction of God in the Church, in our nation and in the Western dominated world, those places where Christianity coincided happily, prosperously and intentionally with slavery and colonization and in which the cry of Black Lives Matter is all too often muted to All Lives Matter or combatted with Blue Lives Matter.”

Less than a year later, in April 2018, Gafney wrote of the beauty of Easter, which she notes can “make it easy to move past the oppressive systems and institutions that ensnared and extra-judicially executed Jesus ...” (p. 2) The rulers of the land conspired against the bold, sharp-tongued Jesus who dared tell communities to live counter-culturally. He was nailed to a cross and killed in a death that served to account for the sins of the world and save the souls of anyone who would call Christ the savior. In this blog post, *The Shadows of Easter*, Gafney reminds us that Jesus’ crucifixion is a continual event.

She writes: “Black Lives Matter activists keep telling us that crucifixion continues whether bullets or nails pierce the bodies of the crucified.”

With this, she implies that the crucifixion occurs every time a Black person is killed as a result of oppressive power structures designed to take our lives and create for us conditions in which no

one would want to live (or should live) (Gafney, 2018). Like Douglas, Gafney highlights the link between the happenings of the Bible and today. She does not impose modern hierarchies on ancient stories. Instead, she draws parallels between the world of the Bible and the world in which Black people live — and struggle to survive.

Among the many things Weems, Douglas, and Gafney have in common, the womanist scholars' work alludes to their belief that social justice is part of the Gospel of Christ. They extend a long tradition within the Black church as racial justice seekers, standing on the shoulders of 20th century Black church leaders who organized during the civil rights movement. For decades, Black spiritual leaders have spoken boldly about the importance of social justice — liberation and freedom from oppression — as important to God and as highlighted in the Bible. In keeping with this tradition, Gafney wrote about the death of Atatiana Jefferson in a poignant essay for NBC News THINK titled “The Atatiana Jefferson shooting in Fort Worth shows black people, again, that we aren't safe here.”

Police shot and killed 28-year-old Jefferson through the window of her family's Fort Worth, Texas, home on Oct. 12. Jefferson and her 8-year-old nephew were up late playing video games on the couch that weekend night. They left the door open to let in the cool breeze and soon heard ruffling in the bushes outside their window. Meanwhile, a neighbor had called police, concerned about the open door (Stengle, 2019). A white officer showed up and had been lurking by the window when Jefferson went to inspect the ruffling she and her nephew heard outside. When she

reached the window, the officer ordered her to show her hands and, a split-second later, shot Jefferson dead. He never identified himself as a police officer (Stengle, 2019).

In the wake of the killing, Gafney stood with clergy, community organizers, and concerned citizens at a vigil for Jefferson. Later, she used her platform and her faith-led heart to decry the abuse of the nation's criminal penal system. She called the vigil the "community's primal scream" (Gafney, 2019).

"We screamed our rage at the police and at Forth Worth Mayor Betsy Price —to her face," Gafney wrote. "And we screamed our rage at the systems and structures that result in unequal policing by design, that construct blackness as monstrosity, and repeat and reinforce the lethal bias that invokes terror at the sight of black skin to excuse profligate violence."

From her words, it is made clear that Gafney does not separate her faith from her race. Her identity as a person of faith has likely compelled her into this life of social justice, whether it be through biblical interpretation or speaking out at vigils for Black people slain by white supremacy. She breaks from the tradition of White Christian culture when she condemns the structures it has built. In her piece, she notes that concerned citizens, clergy, and organizers like her see that Jefferson's death is part of a much larger problem. It seems it is, in part, her faith that moves her to speak out against the status quo in such a way.

She opens her essay boldly: “Black people are not safe in this country, and we are particularly unsafe here in Fort Worth. Our lives are endangered by our own public servants, paid for out of our own pockets. Black women are not safe in any public or private space.”

Weems, too, preaches about the ever-present danger of living Black in the United States. In a 2015 sermon at The Riverside Church in New York City, Weems recalled the story of Hagar. Hagar was an Egyptian slave woman, bound to a Hebrew mistress, Sarah, and Sarah’s husband Abraham. Sarah struggled with fertility and had no children. Despite a promise from God that she would one day conceive, Sarah decided to give Hagar to Abraham for sex with hopes that the handmaid would give birth. She did, and the child legally belonged to Sarah and Abraham.

However, after the birth of the baby boy, Ishmael, Sarah did conceive. She and Abraham welcomed a son named Isaac. With that, Sarah urged Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away. So, he did. With little food, Hagar and Ishmael wandered into the desert, and the new mother was sure her baby would die. However, *“God heard the boy crying” (Genesis 21:17, NIV)*.

“Do not be afraid,” an angel of God told Hagar. “God has heard the boy crying as he lies there.”

In her address, Weems noted that Hagar’s fear is the fear of many Black parents today.

“Tonight, Hagar may be crying, Rachel may be crying. But God says I have heard the cries of the little boy,” she continued. “Thanks be to God. God heard Trayvon’s cry.”

Womanist biblical interpretation connects the humanity of Bible characters to that of people today. As these characters and their stories are often recalled in sermons to articulate a larger spiritual message, and their plights are used as metaphors to explain the character of God, womanist biblical interpretation reminds us that the characters of the Bible were people. They were people who felt, and heard, and laughed and cried and experienced the pains and joys of life that we all do today. When it comes to structures of oppression under which Black Americans live, the pain of the Bible has become very, very relatable.

Weems’ sermon was part of a larger service that focused on the deaths and last words of Black people killed by racism — Eric Garner, Renisha McBride, Martin, Michael Brown, and more.

“Some things are too senseless for words and explanation and exegesis and pontification and even preaching,” Weems said. “Crying and weeping are the only things that make sense ...”

She notes that weeping and “sitting on the mourner’s bench” have come to characterize part of Black faith. She highlights the emotion, anguish, and spirituality of the women who weep after the racist deaths of Black people (Weems, 2015).

“This is what the Lord Almighty says: Consider now! Call for the wailing women to come; send for the most skillful of them. Let them come quickly and wail over us till our eyes overflow with tears” (Jeremiah 9:17, NIV).

Tears have become political. In the era of Black Lives Matter and Donald Trump, the tears of Black people serve to signify the consuming political oppression under which we live (Weems, 2015). Because of this, speaking out against the white supremacy that produces these tears seems to be a priority to Gafney, Douglas, and Weems.

“Make no mistake about it: evangelicalism is white supremacy disguised as religion,” Weems tweeted on Aug. 17, 2019.

An acknowledgment of the political nature of Black death is a blatant disregard for the popular notion that Christians should refrain from talking about politics — because it may “sow discord” within the collective church. But, as noted above, Weems holds that the Bible is a “thoroughly political document,” and it is read from a political position. Thus, a person of faith cannot separate the political nature of the Bible from the political happenings within an oppressive society.

“Trayvon’s generation deserves better fates than what our collective fear and continued racial hatred generates,” Weems said, closing her Riverside sermon with an apology. “We owe your generation an apology. We thought we had nailed things down for you. We thought we were

passing on to you a better future, a more secure future. It's not that we thought that race had been conquered, we thought that at least we had given you a system ... where there was redress."

When thinking about Weems' approach to Biblical interpretation, a common theme presented is that not all that is biblical is right or just. And to understand power structures is to know that multiple forms of oppression are linked. Weems holds that "All insinuations in the canon of oppression and repression deserve our critique and attention."

"Wherever one segment of biblical society presumed theological legitimation for silencing, supplanting, or destroying another segment should sound an alert to our research," she writes (Weems, 1993). "The argument here is that all structures of domination are organically related to one another, meaning that the effectiveness of one type of domination (say, gender oppression) depends upon the support and collaboration of other institutionalized forms of domination (e.g., ethnic, class oppression)."

Conclusion

For decades, Gafney, Douglas, and Weems have consistently contributed theories, ideas, exegesis, and new ways of thinking to the field of biblical scholarship. Their work affirms particular discourses within general biblical scholarship that deepen analyses of class, culture, religion, and race, while contributing its own archive. Their writings and other intellectual offerings fill a void in the world of this scholarship. Many Black Christian women have long

searched for a biblical tradition that would see, affirm, and even prioritize us. These three scholars are part of that tradition, and they take on the tough task of doing womanist biblical scholarship in meaningful, profound ways day after day.

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